

The University of Chicago

THE FUNCTION OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

MARCH, 1945

By
MYRDDYN W. JONES

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CONCLUSION

The Gospel of Mark stands at the beginning of a new development in the history of early Christianity. It was the first of a new type of Christian literature, and hence became the model, as well as source, for later similar Christian attempts. But because the Gospel as a category of literature in the ancient world was different from any other kind, it is possible to say also that Mark, when it was written, was unique, and different from other kinds of ancient writing. Yet, the first Gospel also stood as the culmination of a process; it was not created out of a vacuum. That process was the transmission, transformation and production of memories, traditions, and stories about the Lord of the Christian cult. It was at the beginning oral, but soon it began to exist in written form, in smaller, and then larger, collections of various types of materials. These grew into still larger sources, and at last the first Gospel emerges.

In the history of this process it has been correctly emphasized that the factors which played the most important part had to do with the various interests, problems, and needs of different Christian communities in various centers of the ancient world. This means that the preservation of traditions about Jesus was not due to an antiquarian or historical interest on the part of the earliest Christians, but rather to the real problems, social and religious, which they encountered in the spread of the movement. Earlier traditions were adapted to new conditions and transformed; in frequent cases, there was even a production of stories and teachings. The illustration for this may be seen in the letters of Paul; what he wrote was addressed to particular situations, and when he handed on traditions purporting to come from Jesus it was because those traditions maintained a vital connection with the Christian communities and their needs and interests.

The Pauline letters, however, were written for specific purposes and were never meant to be viewed in any other light than the advice or exhortation from the apostle to churches which he had founded or had helped build, or, in one case, to a church

which he hoped to visit. Even then, such letters must have been as valued because of the stature of the man who wrote them. The process of the transmission of "Gospel" materials is different in one sense; these stories and teaching, because of the figure around whom they were built and with whom they dealt, acquired a certain authority in the churches. This is illustrated again in Paul who hands on traditions "from the Lord," with the expectation that they will thus be rendered the highest reverence.

The Gospel of Mark, as has been said, stands at once as a part of the process and, in a sense, its culmination. With the earliest Gospel a new era in the history of early Christian literature has been reached. But the important fact is that the same motives, practical needs, cultic interests and social problems which were at work in the transmission of materials which grew into the Gospel, were also operative, as effective agents, in the production of Mark. The credit for this most valuable insight must be given, in large part, to the work of social historians and form critics; conclusions may be modified, but they can never be reversed.

However, it is the contention of this discussion that we must not be content with the isolation of the various factors which led to the creation of the first Gospel. The emphasis which has stressed the high importance of Gospel materials as sources for the history of developing Christianity often ceases with the first Gospel, and attention is then turned to that document as a source for the life and teachings of Jesus. That is a legitimate use, but we must never forget the meaning of the Gospel itself, as a whole, for the community in which it was written. If authentic history is preserved it is not because the Gospel's author was conscious of it; he was creating literature for an entirely different purpose. The identification of the motives, needs, and interests which lie behind the Gospel is only one step in arriving at the purpose. The latter is indicated in the point already made, that such traditions had acquired a position of prestige and authority because of their content and the subject with whom they dealt.

The same thing is true of the Gospel of Mark. It is a "Gospel," and its central figure is the most exalted in the Christian cult, its Lord. Hence, the stories about the Lord and the sayings recorded as having come from him will have been accepted

as authoritative tradition. This means, then, that the Gospel was in fact written to be the sacred book of the Roman Christian community, and that we can best understand it from that standpoint.

The important question here is that which concerns the religious function of the document. It is possible to find the contemporary analogy. The environment of early Christianity had opened up for us much information which has enabled us to understand the development of the Christian movement. Because of the age and its ideas it is possible to understand the character of the movement, the problems that confronted it, the ideas held about Jesus and his experiences, items of the miraculous or the ceremonial. Now, in all these cases it is freely admitted that one may not find exact parallelisms or demonstrate sources of specific influence from which "borrowings" were made. It is the essential religious character of the environment, functionally approached, which has made it important for an understanding of early Christianity. It is also conceded that, at best, our information about aspects of ancient religion is fragmentary. The fact that we have no exhaustive records or documents giving us the minute details of Mystery worship, for example, does not hinder us from reconstructing from scattered sources the main lines of that ancient religious life. More important, it does not prevent us from admitting the great importance of this aspect of the environment for the development of Christian worship and Christian ideas.

This discussion has maintained a similar viewpoint for an understanding of the first Gospel. It attempts to provide an explanation for the emergence of Mark which will view the Gospel in its first-century reality and in terms of the environment from which the Christian Church drew its life's blood. It asserts that that environment must be viewed as more than an interesting painted background for the Christian movement, but must be understood as the thing that gave life to the Church. It is aware of the motives and problems, the needs and interests which, it has been said, lie behind the production of the first Gospel; as a matter of fact it builds upon these aspects and they provide one important avenue to the conclusion.

Another is the Graeco-Roman religious life and that which most nearly corresponds in it to the Gospel, the sacred book. The various sacred books of ancient cults provide the real background for the emergence of the Gospel, because of their functions in

ancient worship and life. A survey of those functions and of those of the Gospel of Mark will show the same concerns and the same interests. In this it is admitted that the parallels are not exact, that our information is scanty and very fragmentary. But what we do have at hand is definite and we cannot ignore its importance in the development of a movement whose adherents knew much more about it than we do, because they were part of it and had shared in it. Further, the tradition itself is authoritative; its written form makes it inevitably the sacred writing, the authoritative book of the cult.

A survey of the contents of the Gospel reveals these functions at work. It shows the various motives which lay behind the Gospel. It strengthens the argument for this character of the Gospel. Here are stories of Jesus' great deeds, of his conflicts with Jews, of his contacts with the Baptist, of his teachings, of his sufferings, death and resurrection. But they were divine stories, and they were sacred, and hence authoritative, teachings. They thus become the sacred record of the cult. Any other approach leaves the Gospel in a peculiar position. For Scripture we turn to Judaism, for religious ideas and practices we look to the cults. But here is a document built upon the Lord of the cult himself, and that we are willing to dismiss as the mere collection of various traditions and materials about Jesus of Nazareth, gathered, it is true, in response to certain factors, but nevertheless, a collection. And our efforts become those of attempting to isolate sources, deciding if the report of a certain Christian bishop of the second century is accurate as to authorship, debating as to the merits of the document as a secretary's transcript! We have almost forgotten the Gospel itself and those early Christians who read or heard it in the shadow of death, in the fires of suspicion and hostility.

To them it brought hope and courage. For them it strengthened wavering belief. On them it levelled denunciation for wrong attitudes and wrong deeds. Because of them it told the tragic story of the Lord who was crucified, but of the Lord who triumphed over death. They could have taken only one attitude toward it. They knew, in other cults, what the reading of sacred books meant. And this was theirs. Behind them lay the history of material-transmission, the just concern of a modern scholar. But in front of them, and with them, was the transformation of that material into something different: the first sacred book of the Christian religion.

